

BEORN'S GUIDE TO DEATH'S DOOR



**A GUIDE FOR DM'S TO KEEP THE STAKES OF LIFE AND DEATH FRESH THROUGHOUT A CAMPAIGN, EVEN
AS PLAYERS REACH HIGHER LEVELS.**



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THE DEATH OF A HERO

DEATH CAN COME IN MANY DIFFERENT SHAPES AND forms. It can be sudden and swift or a long agony. In my travels I have faced death several times. I have been at death's door and come back. I've even made the journey to the other side and been brought back by magic. What I have found to be true is that death greets us all in the end. Regardless of if your a young aspiring adventurer or a hardened hero - even a legend.

BEORN

FROM THE AUTHOR

Greetings!

My name is Björn Sundell (yes, Beorn is my real name) and I was first introduced to the wonderful world of Dungeons & Dragons in the early 80's when a friend of mine introduced me to the game by way of a copied version of the basic rules. Needless to say, I became hooked right away.

I have always had an interest in creating worlds for my friends to explore. DnD was my first step into this and pretty soon I fell into the role of the eternal DM.

This urge to create and entertain led me to my current job as a design director at DICE in Stockholm, Sweden, where I've worked on video games such as Battlefield and Star Wars: Battlefront.

Happy adventures!

THE PROSPECT OF DYING

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS IS A GAME ABOUT DARING adventurers that undertake the impossible, even though the odds are stacked high against them. The players are heroes (or anti-heroes). They are the catalyst that drives the story forward.

However, in contrast to a book or a movie, the protagonists in DnD can die. It's never something you'd want to happen (well, sometimes maybe), but the risk of dying should always be there. This is what creates the nerve of the game. Without the risk there are no rewards.

The mechanics that DnD 5e uses when it comes to player deaths are simple. But they tend to create a situation where low level characters are much more likely to die than high level characters. This is all fine and probably expected. You wouldn't want the hero of the realm to die fighting a simple goblin. That's not very hero like. But even so, I find that at higher levels the risk of dying almost goes away. At this point characters usually have a lot of hit points and other additional forms of protection. And to boot, they have a lot of "negative" HP that will keep them from dying.

In this guide you'll find a collection of alternative rules that I use to keep the thrill of the game up - even at higher levels. They are all tied to health, death and damage and how these mechanics apply in the game.

CRITICAL HITS

Let's start with the game changer here - the critical hit. This is a random event that happens whenever a character or monster rolls a natural 20 on their "to hit" roll.

Critical hits are supposed to be just that - critical. While the core rules suggest that you all your damage dice twice and then add any damage bonus to this result, I want to assure that if a player (or a monster) rolls a critical hit they will always do more damage than they would if the roll had been a normal hit.

The rule I use for critical hit is well known. **Take the maximum damage your attack would have dealt together with any damage bonuses and then roll for damage on top of that.** This way - a critical hit is always going to be truly critical. The achievement is to roll the natural 20 - this is what excites everyone around the table. Don't take that away by allowing for the damage to dealt to be sub par.

EXAMPLE

A fighter attacks with her longsword holding it with both hands and roll a natural 20. She has a strength of 16, giving her a damage bonus of +3. The critical hit gives her a damage potential of 10 (max damage using the longsword with both hands) +3 (her ability bonus) + 1-10 (the random damage interval for the longsword used with two hands). Her critical damage can be anywhere from 14 to 23 hit points.

By having the critical hit damage work this way you introduce a state that can be very deadly in any combat situation.

But even so, having critical damage calculated this way, this is usually not enough for higher level players to start treating death as a possibility. Because every character in DnD5e also has a pool of "negative" HP. According to the core rules, this negative pool is the same as the characters maximum hit points. In order for death to always be a factor we also need to look at this mechanic.

INSTANT DEATH

The core rules state that whenever a character is brought to 0 hit points and the remaining damage is greater than their maximum hit points, the character will die instantly. This mechanic works to keep the tension in the game at lower levels. But once characters start pushing something like 30+ hit points - the rule loses its meaning.

To keep the thrill alive I'm using an alternative calculation of the number of negative hit points a character has. The pool still expands with higher levels, but not that dramatically.

To calculate a characters negative hit point pool **take the max hit die of the class and add any constitution bonuses or other hit point bonuses the character may have to that score. Then add 1 hit point per level of the character.**

EXAMPLE

The barbarian class uses the d12 to roll for hit points (12). The character has a constitution of 16 (+3). At 1st level (1) this character would have a negative hit point pool of $(12+3+1)=16$. If the character was at 7th level the negative hit point pool would be $(12+3+7)=22$.

Making this change is vital. Compare it to the core rules where the same barbarian at 7th level would have an average of 70 hit points as their negative hit point pool. They would almost be immortal. Short of a total party kill, not much would have the chance of killing them and thus the thrill of the possibility of dying would be lost. Only a hit that delivers 71+ in damage would actually take them from being alive to dead.

DAMAGE WHEN DOWNED

But there are other ways for characters to die. You don't need to instantly end up below your negative hit point pool. You can gradually get there too.

A rule of thumb for me when it comes to continuing attacks on a character, even after a they're downed, is to look at the intelligence of the creature that attacked. An animal like creature will probably continue to damage its prey - even though there are other things going on around it. Only when directly threatened will it abandon this to defend against other attacks. An intelligent creature will probably let the downed lie and switch targets to any other potential threats.

Attacks made against a downed character are always critical, so if an animal continues to bite and tear at a downed characters the others in the group would be wise to get it away from there immedietly.

HEALTH POTIONS

Healing potions are life savers. Having a healing potion on your person allows you to regain HP after a fight. More importantly - it allows the character to gain HP during a fight, regardless of if the groups' healer is close by or not.

According to the core rules, when a character drinks a healing potion they regain the random number of hit points corresponding to the strength of the healing potion. A standard health potion gives the user 2d4+2 hit points back.

I've always found this strange - that health potions don't give you back a standard value. You don't become half invisible when you drink a potion of invisibility - do you?

The rule I use here is that when a character drinks a health potion they **regain the maximum amount of hit points the potion can give**. But there is a but. If in combat - if you spend your action drinking the potion you will gain the max amount of hit points back. But, in order not to forfeit their action, a character may also drink a health potion **as a bonus action, having to roll for the healing effect of the potion** as you stand the chance of spilling out liquid or not emptying the bottle.

HEALING A DOWNED CHARACTER

Characters who end up below 0 hit points can be revived in several ways. Both magically and normally. The state at which they are revived varies by how close to dying they were.

According to the core rules, a character who ends up below 0 hit point need to make Death Saving throws. Once each round, on the characters turn they need to roll a d20. To become stable and beyond the grip of death they need to get a result of 10 three times. But if

they fail, each fail brings them closer to death. Failing three times means the character died.

Other characters can break this condition by stabilizing or healing the downed character. Using a healers kit puts the downed character in a stable state with 0 hit point. Resting will eventually make them return to consciousness, regaining 1 hit point after 1d4 hours of rest. If you don't have a healer's kit anyone with proficiency in the medicine skill can try to stabilize the creature too. But this requires a successful DC 10 Wisdom (medicine) check.

Magic healing can be used too. Spending an action to pour a health potion down the throat of a downed character will let them take the full effect of the potion, regaining whatever hit points the potion gives. Healing spells is another way to revoke the dying state. But once out of it - how does the character actually feel?

THE REVIVED CONDITION

This condition is an alternative rule that puts some weight on the fact that a character has been below 0 hit points. It's an easy rule to remember as it uses the exhaustion ruleset.

Whenever a character ends up with less than 0 hit points they gain one level of exhaustion. **For each failed death save after this they gain another level of exhaustion**. Regardless of how many levels of exhaustion the character ends up with before being revived they are all removed once the character has had a long rest. They can of course be removed with magic that removes exhaustion such as the lesser restoration spell.

This means that a character who has been downed and failed at two death saves before being revived and regaining any hit points will have three levels of exhaustion (disadvantage on ability checks, speed halved and disadvantage on attack rolls and saving throws) until they've had a long rest.

DOWNED STATE EFFECT

Failed Death saves	Effect
0	Disadvantage on ability checks
1	Speed halved
2	Disadvantage on attack rolls and saving throws
3	Death